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Mousse
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Tiran Willemse: Dweller
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MOUSSE



Tiran Willemse: Exercises in Bodily Liberation
by Donasia Tillery

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READING TIME 7'



Tiran Willemse, *Blackmilk*, 2021, performance at Stanley & Audrey Burton Theatre, Transform Festival, Leeds, 2025. Photo: JMA Photography

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For Tiran Willemse, the body is a container for history. The South African-born, Zurich- and Berlin-based conceptual artist and choreographer has since 2018 created touring live performances and installations aimed at revealing the somatic devastation inflicted through Western hegemony, and liberating Black bodies from its grip. Drawing from African ritual and dance alongside queer ballroom showcases, Willemse's site-responsive performance scores oscillate between the kinetic and the sedated, the choreographed and the intuitive, calling to the fore repressed histories of colonization and apartheid, and echoing James Baldwin's insight that "people are trapped in history, and history is trapped in them."¹



At the heart of this endeavor is an insistence on corporeal and spiritual rebellion—a robust dissent Willemse channels through specific anti-colonial movement practices. Nigeria's Alanta dance, known for its exaggerated facial contortions and frantic hand waving to release stifled emotion, serves as one pillar, as does Kuduro, an avant-garde form emerging during Angola's civil war, which expresses political resistance through rapid footwork and theatrical gestures. Willemse additionally draws on Butoh, or "the dance of darkness," a postwar Japanese dance-theater movement that renounces Western rigidity through slow, elongated movements invoking the traumatic and the grotesque.²

Piecing these elements together, Willemse's practice presents a mosaic of gestures aimed at bodily freedom—a pursuit that animates *Blackmilk* (2021), his first independent performance piece. Premiering at Les Urbaines in Lausanne, and performed across prominent European venues, including Switzerland's Kunsthau Baselland, Austria's ImPulsTanz (the Vienna International Dance Festival), and Italy's Santarcangelo Festival, the work sees Willemse melding Butoh's fluid, sweeping arms with Alanta's frenetic hand fluttering against an atmospheric instrumental score. Detailing the vision behind the work, which won the 2023 Swiss Performance Art Award, Willemse tells me he additionally drew inspiration from queer voguing and ballet, modes through which he pushes the boundaries of Black manhood and probes generative slippages between masculine and feminine expression. With delicate movements that defy the expectations projected onto his body, *Blackmilk* shows Willemse quite literally shaking off restrictive paradigms of Black masculinity, his anti-colonial critique simultaneously serving as a critique of the gender binary, understanding each as systems policing the Black body.



In *Untitled (Nostalgia, Act 3)* (2023), Willemse further mines the possibilities of ballet through the nineteenth-century classic *Giselle* (1841), which traces its titular character's experience of heartbreak, mania, and dancing herself to death, ultimately returning to protect her lover as a ghost. *Giselle* inspired the movements of *Untitled (Nostalgia, Act 3)*, in which Willemse embodies the madness of hierarchy and resurrects societal ghosts. Before the packed audiences of Austria's Tanzquartier Wien, Geneva's Pavillon ADC, and New York's Danspace Project, among others, his gracious pliés are interpolated by writhing, convulsing, and shrill cackling, as if he is possessed by some invisible force. Unpredictably, between his motley gestures, the artist approaches audience members, greeting them with Alanta's crazed facial expressions and standing uncomfortably close, performing long bouts of unnerving stillness—confrontations with Black embodiment so often evaded for the sake of comfort.



Still, punctuating the performance's melancholic valleys are decidedly joyous peaks, as Willemse spontaneously skips and frolics with abandon. Rather than switching between dance styles, the movements are situated at their intersections, a liminal space that illuminates what the racialized body recalls—and what it foretells. The work thus evinces a somatic "structure of feeling" shared by colonized people.³ These cultures' parallel embodiments of rage, humor, and refusal teach us something about what racialization, colonization, and their attendant queer antagonism do to both the psyche and the body itself.



Dweller (2026), the artist's first US solo exhibition, taking place at New York's Swiss Institute, is the latest of these works, their themes merging in a stirring three-channel video installation. To enter the show, I descend a winding staircase, flooded with red LED light. Opening the door into the film, I find myself surrounded by massive screens, each showcasing Willemse performing against different backdrops. Staged variously in the Swiss Alps, a theater on the German-Swiss border, and a barn that once sheltered immigrants, the work unfolds in filmic vignettes. Willemse shares that the piece came to be after a visit to the British Museum in London, where he lamented spiritually charged West African masks being exhibited as decorative objects. Performing catatonic gestures and ecstatic dances on hazy mountain ranges and in dimly lit halls that evoke the spectral, Willemse animates these artifacts, seeking to "make them alive."⁴ Beyond the evocative mix of anguish, gaiety, and ancestral remembrance present in the work, I am most moved by its sheer inability to be contained, as the three screens project overstimulating sequences of light, sound, movement, and place. Willemse shares with me that this is a commentary on the expansiveness and fugitivity of Blackness itself: "People told me the show is so full that they feel overwhelmed, but that's sort of the point. You cannot contain Blackness."⁵

Willemse's institutional critique feels especially prominent in *Dweller*, as the cacophony of startling sounds and boisterous movements rebel against the disciplined restraint of the gallery space. Viewing the work as a Black woman, I find myself confronted by the intense, relentless policing my body endures to exist in this society, how even the freest iterations of my life have been lived in a cage. To watch Willemse free himself from those cages offers deep catharsis, as if reminding me that there is indeed another way. In this sense, Willemse's work is as future-facing as it is reminiscent, encouraging viewers to assess and struggle against their own corporeal bondage.

If it's true that "the body keeps the score,"⁶ Willemse is invested in illuminating the unique remembrances and wisdom of the *body politic*—how cultural and ancestral memory live on at the cellular level, where our bodies insist on expression and release for their very survival. Willemse achieves freedom not through mere detachment from or transcendence of pain, but rather in daring to speak its existence. Freedom, simply put, is in the truth-telling.

Tiran Willemse (b. 1987, South Africa) is a dancer and choreographer who lives and works in Zurich. Recent performances have been presented at Palais de Tokyo, Paris; Cantonal Museum of Fine Arts, Lausanne; Museo MACRO, Rome; Serralves Museum, Porto; Musée de l'Orangerie, Paris; Roskilde Festival, Roskilde; Danspace project, New York; and Museum of Contemporary Art Kiasma, Helsinki. Willemse won the Swiss Performance Prize in 2023.

Donasia Tillery is a writer, editor, and poet based in New York. Her work explores the intersections of race, gender, structural trauma, and spirituality to construct liberatory epistemologies. Her writing has been featured in Artforum, Momus, Mousse, Contemporary Art Review Los Angeles, and Artillery Magazine, among others. She is the recipient of Mozaik Philanthropy's Future Art Writers Award (2022) and editor of the anthology *The Archive as Liberation* (Light Work, 2025).